


PRELIMINARY STAFF
SUMMARY OF INFORMATION

WASHINGTON PARK COURT DISTRICT

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WASHINGTON PARK COURT DISTRICT

4900 to 4959 Washington Park Court and 417 to 439 East 50th Street

Exclusivity, and the prestige inherent in it, have been the hallmarks of the 4900-block of Washington Park from its inception. A block largely developed over a ten-year period beginning in 1895, Washington Park Court has many of the trappings of a private residential street, though it is in fact a public thoroughfare. Part of the reason for its exclusive character lies in its physical characteristics. The street does not continue through the blocks adjoining it on the north and south. Further, the diminished scale of the houses, reminiscent of Alta Vista Terrace but not as diminutive, and the continuity of the architecture create a small urban enclave readily distinguished from neighboring blocks. The physically distinctive aspects of the block were and continue to be an attraction to homeowners on the street, who have cultivated the singular qualities of the block.

Washington Park Court is a single block within the larger Grand Boulevard neighborhood, an area which experienced rapid growth beginning in the 1890s. Until 1889, the area south of 41st Street and east of State was part of Hyde Park Township and, consistent with the rural character of that township, settlement was sparse. Frame houses of varying scale were interspersed throughout the community. The annexation of Hyde Park in 1889 by the City of Chicago immediately preceded a tremendous building boom throughout the South Side which transformed previously rural areas into a series of urban neighborhoods within a single decade.

As noted by Dominic Pacyga and Ellen Skerrett in their authoritative *Chicago, City of Neighborhoods*, the development of the area between State Street and Cottage Grove Avenue was based on improvements to public transportation systems. The extension of the Cottage Grove cable car to 63rd Street by 1887 and the opening of the "El" to Jackson Park provided the ready access between this and the downtown areas.

The predominant impetus to development of the area came from improvements to Grand Boulevard (now Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Drive) itself. Among the most elegant

of the boulevards, Grand Boulevard extended from 35th Street to the entrance of Washington Park at 51st Street. The park, which was created in 1873 according to plans by Frederick Law Olmsted, was laid out with a series of gardens and meadows linked by small paths. Because of its remote location, access was largely limited to those who had carriages. In the late 1880s, improvements to Grand Boulevard complemented the rustic character of the park. The street was laid out as a greenway, with a wide central roadway and two ancillary lanes for equestrian use. The landscaped thoroughfare lent itself to the popular custom of promenading, in which socially elite groups spent Sunday afternoons strolling or riding in carriages down the boulevard. Given the popularity of the thoroughfare, it was not surprising that in the building boom of the 1890s, the boulevard became the focus for upper-class settlement, with the construction of large, greystone and brownstone mansions.

The larger community quickly attained the identity of a high-class neighborhood populated by the families of Chicago's leading professionals and businessmen. Streets adjoining the boulevard were only relatively less affluent in character than their Grand Boulevard counterparts, with middle-class townhouses situated east of the boulevard and apartment buildings located on the larger blocks to the west. Ethnically, the area was comprised of second-generation Jews and Irish Catholics who were moving from the older areas on the South and Near West sides where their immigrant parents had settled.

The 4900-block of Washington Park Court was laid out as part of the block bounded by Grand Boulevard, 49th Street, Vincennes Avenue, and 50th Street, subdivided in 1892 by the real estate firm of T.G. Dickinson & Co. It was the characteristics of the original subdivision that distinguished the block from others in the area. In contrast to the prevailing north-south orientation of blocks in the neighborhood, the strip of land between Grand Boulevard and Vincennes Avenue was generally platted as single blocks with an east-west alignment. The Dickinson & Co. subdivision departed from the pattern of the blocks to the north and south in that it provided a north-south street, Washington Park Court, bisecting its property. In combination with the east-west arrangements of the blocks to the north and south, Washington Park Court was effectively closed off to through traffic, creating a small secluded tract. Overall, the Dickinson & Co. layout was an adroit division of the property for the manner in which its exterior frontage, on Grand Boulevard and Vincennes Avenue, respected the north-south lineal development of the neighborhood, while creating a separate, more private street on the interior of the block.

The construction of dwellings on Washington Park Court did not begin until 1895. Two to three adjoining parcels were typically purchased at one time by speculators who improved them with several houses and then sold the individual units. Development of the block occurred quickly as the majority of buildings were constructed by 1900.

Grand Boulevard was a socially prominent area and Washington Park Court was no exception to the rule. Selected residents of the block were listed in the *Chicago Blue Book* beginning in 1898, and by 1905 and continuing through at least 1916, most of the homeowners on the block were listed. Homeowners included Arthur Wellesly Masters (at

4952 Washington Park Court), general manager of the London Guarantee and Accident Co.; August Gatzert (4915), an executive of the wholesale clothing manufacturing firm of Rosenwald & Weil; Jonas L. Pfaelzer (4959), manager of the Pfaelzer meat distribution company; and Arthur William Draper (4955), of the real estate firm of Draper & Kramer.

As reported in an oral history of the block in 1922, Washington Park Court was a world unto itself. According to the former resident:

It was a street of charming middle-class homes, each owned by its occupant, whose pride was his "castle" and the street. Traditions as ironbound as those of old New England, and precedent and ritual well nigh as formal as ancestor worship held its convention bound and convention loving residents in a closely knit bond which all abided in peace and amity.

Feelings for the block apparently overcame traditional religious and ethnic rivalries as residents were comprised of Jews, Catholics, and Protestants. Early in the block's history the Washington Park Court Improvement Association was formed to provide for street-cleaning, gardening, and other common improvements. The association appears to have also been responsible for the promulgation of property covenants prohibiting the erection of apartment buildings and restricting property sales to whites. The world continued to go on around Washington Park Court, but residents tried to insulate themselves from it as long as possible.

Larger racial and economic change began to have an impact on the Grand Boulevard community and inevitably the isolated block of Washington Park Court. As noted ironically by the former resident, "finally the block awoke to the alarming fact that they were not assimilating, but being assimilated." Between 1910 and 1920, a period often referred to as the "Great Migration" due to the great numbers of blacks who left the South for greater opportunities in the North, the black population of Chicago increased by 148%. In the late teens, one of the houses on Washington Park Court was sold for use as a boarding house, and in the early twenties the first black families began to move onto the block. Racial turnover on the street was apparently rapid, and the passing of an era was reflected in the words of Washington Park Court's anonymous chronicler:

Now we are but city-dwellers, where formerly we lived in a little world of our own hemmed in and bound by the most intimate primary contacts. It was a very nice little world, this tiny little space in a big city, - whose "niceness" was partially its undoing. We were all glad to be a part of it until we grew beyond it and till it got beyond us.

Although the movement of blacks into the community transformed the white, middle-class character of Grand Boulevard, and Washington Park Court specifically, the area retained much of its middle-class and professional character. Some of the houses were divided into apartments, and 4959 Washington Park Court, which turns the corner of the court at 50th Street, became a church in, or possibly before, 1949.

Several well-known persons have lived on Washington Park Court in more recent years. Ida Cox (1896-1967) resided at 4942 Washington Park Court after a career of some thirty years as a blues singer in Chicago and across the country, performing in 1934 with Bessie Smith in an Apollo Theatre Review and also singing in Carnegie Hall. Edith Sampson (1901-1979) was an attorney and a judge of the Circuit Court of Cook County who in 1950 was the first black appointed to the U.S. delegation to the United Nations. She resided at 4910 Washington Park Court. Jewel LaFontant, attorney and holder of various appointments in the federal government, grew up on this street in the 1920s and 1930s.

The Architecture of Washington Park Court

The special environment of Washington Park Court is a function of the uniformity of construction along the block. The original Dickinson subdivision plat established fifty-foot building lots and specified a ten-foot building line. The rowhouses that came to be built along the block are mostly twenty-five feet in width, but the ten-foot setback was respected. Variety and uniformity are the keys to the unique feeling of Washington Park Court. Within the limitations of the rowhouse form, a diverse yet cohesive ensemble was created. In addition to following a common front building line, the architects responsible for these houses employed a common stylistic vocabulary, expressed in brick and limestone. The structures vary from two to three stories in height, but an impression of a uniform building height is the result of the third floors generally taking the form of mansard roofs above cornices which are of a common height with the two-story houses. The first floors are reached by flights of masonry steps, again of a common height, with stone slab banisters. Almost every house has a bay front, some rounded and some segmental.

Although the street was not developed in the same manner as, for example, Alta Vista Terrace on the North Side, by one developer using one architect to construct the entire street of forty houses in four years, a somewhat similar pattern occurred on Washington Park Court. Most of the houses on the street were built in pairs or in groups of three, four, or more by a limited number of developers. Chief among these were Andrew and John (or Jonathan) N. Dubach. Of the fifty-one houses facing Washington Park Court, at least twenty-five were constructed by the Dubachs. Six other owners were responsible for a total of nineteen houses, each building two to four houses. The rest were apparently built as single units. At least thirty-three of the fifty-one houses on the court were built between 1895 and 1900; at least thirteen more were built between 1901 and 1905. Fourteen houses have been identified as the work of architect Henry L. Newhouse. Twelve of these were for the Dubachs, and Newhouse may have designed other Dubach-constructed houses for which no architect has been identified. Five houses for owner Thomas J. Leonard were designed by architect Andrew Sandegren, and various other architects contributed smaller numbers of designs.

The Dubachs and Henry Newhouse clearly set the tone for the street. Unfortunately, almost nothing further is known about Andrew and John Dubach except that they oversaw their investment by living on Washington Park Court. The 1898 *Lakeside Directory*, which identifies them as "contractors," lists them as residing at 4942 Washington Park

Court. In 1900, they were living at 4950 Washington Park Court and by 1905, they had moved to 4927 Washington Park Court. In 1907, they were living elsewhere in the neighborhood; they did own other land in the vicinity and built additional residences designed by Henry Newhouse. None of the other developers of multiple units on Washington Park Court lived on the street.

Henry L. Newhouse (1874-1929) was a prominent Chicago architect whose practice centered on the South Side. His designs for houses, apartment buildings and hotels, commercial buildings, motion picture theaters, and synagogues are found in other parts of the city as well and in Indiana, Michigan, and Iowa. His house for Simon L. Marks at 4726 South King Drive, known as the Melissia Ann Elam House, is a designated Chicago Landmark. His designs for Washington Park Court reflect the popular taste of the time for architectural styles derived from various historical periods. While 4940 and 4942 Washington Park Court, built in 1897, both employ classical details, limestone-fronted 4940 is in the Gothic style, and 4942 used brick with stone trim to picturesque effect. 4922 Washington Park Court, built in 1903 along with 4920 Washington Park Court, is a turreted and crenellated castle while 4920 reflects the classically-inspired architecture of the eighteenth century.

Newhouse's 1899 group of five houses for Andrew Dubach at 4944 to 4952 Washington Park Court are restrained examples of variations on the classical theme, but the design for 4952 stand out for its vivid detail, especially its arcaded porch in the Renaissance manner. Architect E. H. Salisbury's colonial revival house of 1898 turns the corner at 4958 Washington Park Court and East 50th Street with its wide main facade on 50th, but its finely detailed roof gable and dominant chimney face the court. The flat front of 4912 Washington Park Court, constructed in 1895 as part of a group of four houses owned by M. G. Larned, is an elegant evocation of classical design with a second-floor oriel window of pressed metal featuring garlands over its three arched windows. 429 East 50th Street solidly terminates the court at its south end with a Romanesque front of ashlar limestone laid in alternating wide and narrow bands from the second floor to the top of its high gable. These are among the most distinctive houses in the district, but every facade is worthy of inspection for the materials, craftsmanship, and overall design exhibited throughout.

The distinctiveness of the spatial environment of Washington Park Court sets it off within its neighborhood. Other streets may feature a similar pattern of development and architecture not unlike what is found in this district. By creating this short street, enclosed between 49th and 50th streets, the subdividers hoped to create a special place which, while lacking the gates of a private street, would nonetheless have that distinctive sense of enclosure which makes such a place so attractive. Some changes have occurred in the district over the years, but the alterations to the physical structures are minor and in no way diminish the special flavor of the place. Today, architects, planners, and developers look to examples of such streets as models for establishing congenial environments that encourage feelings of community. Washington Park Court is a worthwhile example for further study.



KING DRIVE

S. SOUTH

E 48TH

49TH

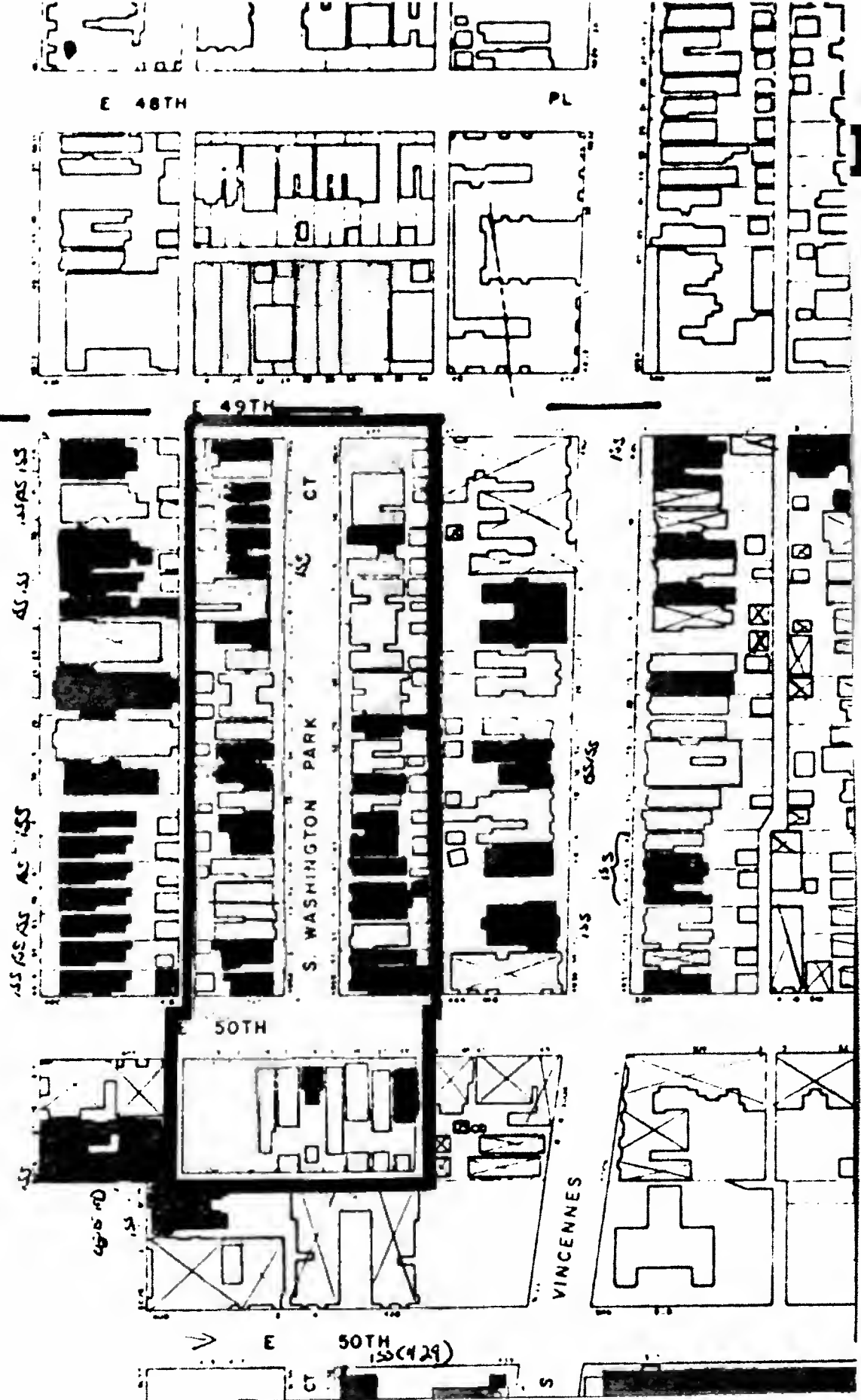
S. WASHINGTON PARK CT

50TH

VINCENNES

E

50TH
150C429





OPPOSITE:

Although exact dates and architects have not been identified for 4938, 4936, and 4934 Washington Park Court (*from the right*), these three rowhouses are clearly of the period and styles that typify the district. 4940 (*middle left*) is an 1897 design by Henry Newhouse for John Dubach.

(Photograph by Raymond T. Tatum for the Chicago Historic Resources Survey)



OPPOSITE:

4952 (*left*) and 4920 (*right*) Washington Park Court are designs by Henry Newhouse for Andrew Dubach. 4952, built in 1899, is an elaborately detailed exercise in Renaissance classicism. 4920 dates from 1903 and exhibits a more restrained employment of classical details.

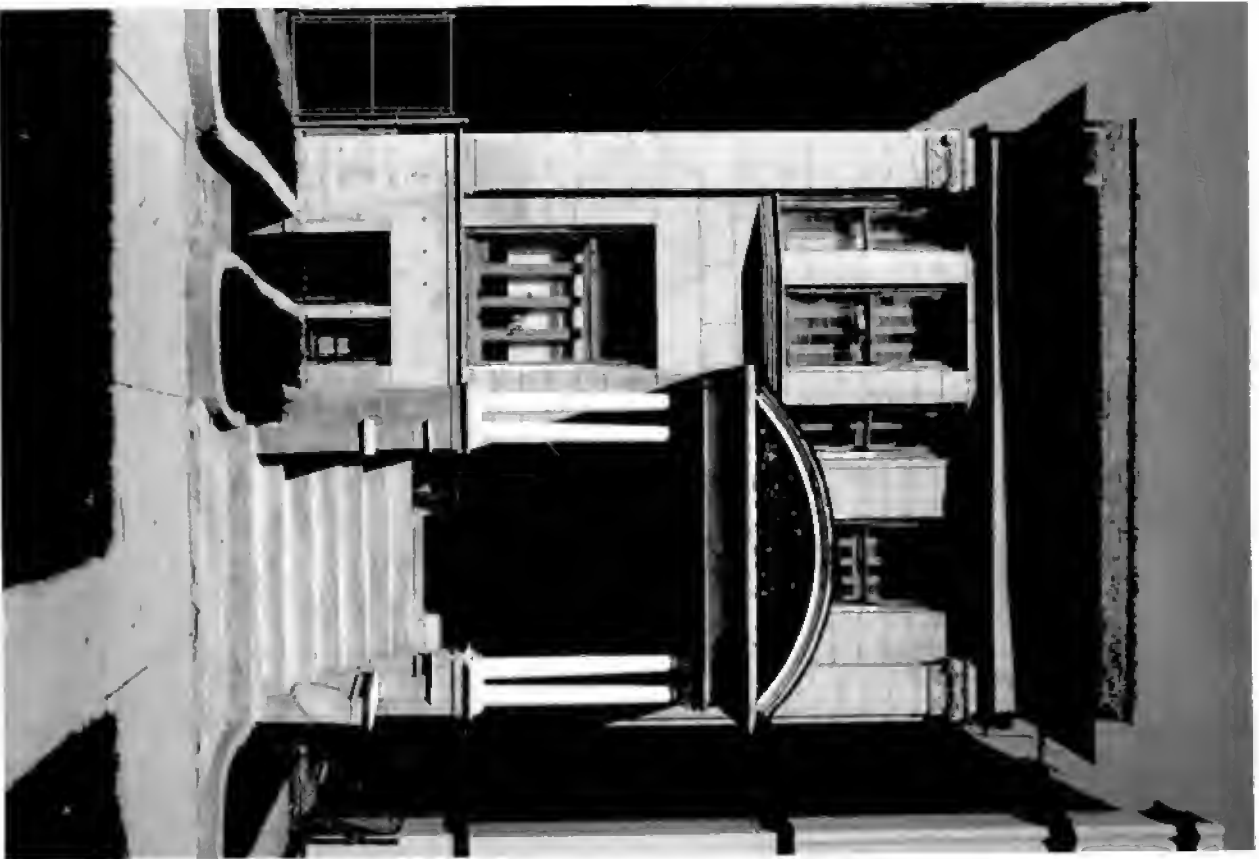
(Photographs by Elaine Batson and Timothy Wittman for the Chicago Historic Resources Survey)



OPPOSITE:

M.G. Larned built four two-story houses in 1895 at 4906 to 4912 Washington Park Court, all demonstrating elegant classical forms (*left*). The broad plane and Romanesque detailing of 429 East 50th Street (*right*) faces the south end of Washington Park Court.

(Photographs by Raymond T. Tatum and Elaine Batson for the Chicago Historic Resources Survey)



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